

From: Office of Terje Rod-Larsen <[REDACTED]>
Subject: October 28 update
Date: Mon, 28 Oct 2013 08:52:19 +0000

28 October, 2013

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The Washington Post

Foreign policy based on fantasy

[Jackson Diehl](#)

“One is forced to wonder whether disarmament or arms control issues, severed from economic and political issues, might be another instance of

focusing on the symptoms of a problem instead of the disease itself.”

October 27, 2013 -- Barack Obama [wrote those words in 1983](#), when he was a student at Columbia University. He was describing the nuclear freeze movement and how its focus on warhead numbers left the larger social justice issues of the Cold War era unaddressed. But he could just as well have been describing his own policies in the Middle East 30 years later — and why they have driven a wedge between the United States and some of its closest allies.

In his zeal to extract his administration from what he sees as a regional quagmire, Obama, like the old freeze movement, has adopted a narrow and high-altitude approach to a complex and sprawling set of conflicts. Rising above the carnage in Syria — or “somebody else’s civil war,” as he called it in his [recent speech at the United Nations](#) — he has adopted a priority of destroying the country’s chemical weapons arsenal. He seeks to put stronger safeguards on Iran’s nuclear program while sidestepping its larger effort to use terrorism and proxy wars to become a regional hegemon. From a certain Washington point of view, Obama’s aims look worthy and, better yet, plausibly achievable — unlike, say, establishing democracy in Iraq. The problem with the approach is that it assumes that the Syrian civil war and other conflicts across the region pose no serious threat to what Obama calls “core U.S. interests,” and that they can be safely relegated to the nebulous realm of ████ diplomacy and [Geneva conferences](#), where Secretary of State John Kerry lives.

Let’s suppose for the moment that [al-Qaeda’s new base in eastern Syria](#), Hezbollah’s deployment of [tens of thousands of missiles in Lebanon](#) and the [crumbling of the U.S.-fostered Iraqi political system](#) pose no particular threat to America. That still leaves U.S. allies in the region — Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey — marooned in a scary new world where their vital interests are no longer under U.S. protection.

[Israel and Saudi Arabia worry](#) that Obama will strike a deal with Iran that frees it from sanctions without entirely extirpating its capacity to enrich uranium — leaving it with the potential to produce nuclear weapons. But more fundamentally, they and their neighbors are dismayed that the United States appears to have opted out of the regional power struggle between Iran and its proxies and Israel and the Arab states aligned with the United States. It is the prospect of waging this regional version of the Cold War

without significant U.S. support that has prompted [Saudi leaders to hint at a rupture](#) with Washington — and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to talk more publicly than ever about [Israel's willingness to act alone](#).

Obama's defenders have some answers to this: There's no reason, they say, for the United States to be sucked down the rabbit hole of every Middle East conflict. The motives and interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel aren't always worth encouraging. The former is driven by the atavistic sectarian enmity between Sunni and Shia; the latter sees no chance of co-existence with an Islamic Republic. Anyway, the Obamites say, the administration is trying to address the region's larger problems through the pursuit of a political settlement in Syria as well as an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Here lies another problem. Virtually no one outside the State Department — including the nominal parties to the talks — takes seriously the possibility that Kerry's plan for a Geneva conference to settle the Syrian war can work in the foreseeable future, or that [Israelis and Palestinians can agree](#) on a two-state settlement. They play along with the process to please Washington, or Moscow, while complaining to journalists like me that Kerry's diplomacy is based on fantasy. Who can imagine Syrian President Bashar al-Assad placidly agreeing to step down? Or Netanyahu ceding East Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley to the Palestinians and their security forces?

Diplomatic breakthroughs, like arms control agreements, don't happen in a vacuum; they happen because political, economic and security conditions make them possible. The nuclear freeze movement failed in the early 1980s because the Soviet Union still presented a tangible and inescapable threat to the West. A Syrian peace conference could not succeed now because the Assad regime is in no immediate danger of losing on the battlefield.

For Obama, succeeding in even the limited objectives he has set for the Middle East would require reshaping conditions on the ground: weakening Assad, degrading Iranian strength, bolstering Israeli and Saudi confidence. That work could be done without deploying U.S. troops, but it would be hard, expensive and require a lot of presidential attention. It would mean, as a bright young student once put it, focusing on "the disease itself."

NYT

Why Arabs Fear a U.S.-Iran Détente

Marwan Bishara

October 27, 2013 -- Tensions between Saudi Arabia and the United States over Washington's approach to the Middle East were brewing for months before they burst into the open last week.

First, there was the American inaction in Syria and lack of progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace. Then came America's withdrawal of aid to the Egyptian military after the July coup. Now President Obama is pursuing a very public rapprochement with Iran, Saudi Arabia's archrival.

The mounting disagreements between the two longtime allies is now in full public view. Last week, the head of Saudi intelligence warned that it would stop cooperating with the United States on certain issues. That came just days after Saudi Arabia stunned even some of its own diplomats when it refused a rotating seat on the United Nations Security Council, citing its anger over the world's failure to respond to the crisis in Syria.

This spat reflects the Arab world's deepening frustration with American policy toward Syria, Egypt and Palestine — as well as extreme skepticism about a possible thaw in America's relations with Iran.

The Arabs have learned from bitter experience that whether by confrontation or collaboration, whatever Iran, America and Israel decide to do leaves them feeling trampled. Like an African proverb says: Whether the elephants fight or play, the grass gets trampled.

America chose Iran and Israel, over their Arab neighbors, as its designated "regional cops" in the 1960s and '70s, at the height of the Cold War. Since the United States and Iran became sworn enemies after the 1979 revolution, America's military wishes have by and large been carried out by Arab proxies, often at great cost in blood, treasure and stability. Lebanon, Iraq and Syria are among the countries that have suffered immensely.

Strikingly, until last week, it was only Israel, not its Arab neighbors, that had criticized the thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations (even though Israel might gain a lot from a deal that curtails Iran's nuclear ambitions).

But ultimately, reconciliation between America and Iran will require compromise over Arab, not Israeli, interests. And these interests are neither Washington's to cede nor Iran's to brush aside.

Arab powers fear that negotiations between America and Iran are likely to leave Israel as the one nuclear power in the region, while allowing its occupation of Palestine to continue unabated.

Improved relations between Iran and America could offer benefits: a lifting of Western sanctions and American recognition (however grudging) of Iran's growing regional influence, starting with Syria, Bahrain and the Gulf region. The United States could use Iran's help to stabilize Syria — as it helped with Afghanistan after 9/11.

But sooner than later, what appears to be a great diplomatic breakthrough may be revealed to be no more than hopping over a volcano.

That's because Iranian-American détente will likely deepen the sectarian divisions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, setting the stage for an all-out regionwide sectarian conflict.

Since its 1979 revolution, Iran has become increasingly militarized and religiously radicalized. The Shiite-Sunni tensions that fueled the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 have only grown worse.

As the Saudi government made clear last week, authoritarian Sunni regimes in the region will probably seek to undermine — rather than accept — any agreement that foresees growing Iranian influence in their backyard.

That polarization will inadvertently help Al Qaeda and other extremist Sunni groups, who are bound to see in Iranian-Western rapprochement a tool to multiply their recruits by stoking sectarian hatred. It has already happened in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, and it's likely to continue.

The consequences are potentially disastrous. Shiite-Sunni fault lines extend through most oil-producing countries. The damage to the regional and global economy from a disruption in the supply of oil could be huge.

But none of this is preordained or inevitable.

The theological roots of the Sunni-Shiite divide might go back 13 centuries, but the violence we are witnessing today is politically motivated and aggravated by foreign intervention in the region.

The Arab states rejected America's 2003 war in Iraq, which is now ruled by an authoritarian prime minister who is firmly under Iran's influence. They

are not taking kindly to Iran's continued meddling in the region, including its military support for Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad. Indeed, the Syrian opposition has rejected any role for Iran in talks over the future of their country.

While the elephants have been playing, and fighting, Arab leaders have been watching and learning. They know that long-term regional stability is a game they can play, too.

With 370 million people in 22 countries that range from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, Arabs are bound to disagree about plenty of things. But they generally support a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction — and that applies to both Iran and Israel.

The Arab nations, because of their size and strategic significance, are indispensable in shaping the region's future and its security. Alienating them is wrong — and dangerous.

If, as Mr. Obama said recently at the United Nations, he believes that it is in America's best interest "to see a Middle East and North Africa that is peaceful and prosperous," he needs to make sure the Arabs are part of, and don't lose from, any future bargain with Iran.

Marwan Bishara is senior political analyst at Al Jazeera and the author of "The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Perils of the Arab Revolution."

[Article 3.](#)

Asharq Al-Awsat

American and Iranian DNA

Ataollah Mohajerani

October 28, 2013 -- Wendy Sherman, the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs and the State Department's third-ranking official, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on October 3: "The fundamental large sanctions that we have in place should not disappear anytime soon, unless all of our concerns are addressed by the Iranians. . . . We know that deception is part of the DNA."

In an attempt to clarify the comments attributed to Sherman, the US State Department's deputy spokeswoman, Marie Harf, said: "I think first that

doubtless each side has said things that have offended the other side over the last, what, thirty years now, and each side has commented publicly on its inability to trust the other side.”

“This mistrust has deep roots, and we don’t think it can be overcome overnight, but we made some progress last week in Geneva, and we hope to continue making progress, including with additional bilateral meetings going forward,” Harf added.

Finally, Harf tried to justify Wendy Sherman’s statement about Iranians’ DNA, saying that Sherman did not actually mention individual Iranians per se. It is a bit hard to accept her justification when we examine the statement in context.

As we know, Satan is the great deceiver, whose deception of Adam and Eve marked the beginning of human history as we know it. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini named America “the Great Satan.”

Now, 35 years later, when Wendy Sherman says deception is part of Iranian DNA, this is really a tit-for-tat reaction. Iran’s nuclear program is still at the forefront of all the issues and problems between America and Iran, and it is the most sensitive issue for the Israelis. There is a deep and complicated psychological and propaganda war between America and Israel on one side and the Iran on the other.

The US Congress is the strongest supporter of Israel, and most of the Congressmen and Congresswomen are pro-Israel. Who can forget Netanyahu’s speech to Congress on May 24, 2011, at a time when Obama was outside America? Netanyahu could only dream of such a reception in Israel. Even his wife, Sarah, received a standing ovation when she entered the hall. The prime minister was applauded some 30 times, many of them standing ovations. An important question arises: Why is the US Congress the strongest supporter of Israel? The answer is clear: Most of the Congressmen and Congresswomen are backed by the pro-Israel lobby in America. For instance, there is a very famous figure who plays a notable role in all elections in America.

Sheldon Adelson, the billionaire who extensively funded numerous Republican campaigns in the 2012 election, said at a forum at the Yeshiva University that President Obama should fire an atomic weapon into the middle of the desert to send a message to Iran.

“What are we going to negotiate about? What I would say is, ‘Listen, you see that desert out there? I want to show you something,’” Adelson said. “You pick up your cellphone, and you call somewhere in Nebraska, and you say, ‘Okay, let it go.’ So there’s an atomic weapon goes over—ballistic missiles—in the middle of the desert that doesn’t hurt a soul.”

“Yeshiva” means an institute of learning where students study sacred texts, primarily the Talmud. In other words, Yeshiva University is more Jewish than Christian, and more Israeli than American. Adelson is the king of casinos in the US and around the world. And he continued to suggest that the US attack Tehran with an atomic bomb: “Then you say, ‘See? The next one is in the middle of Tehran.’ So, we mean business. You want to be wiped out? Go ahead and take a tough position and continue with your nuclear development. . . . You want to be peaceful? Just reverse it all, and we will guarantee you that you can have a nuclear power plant for electricity purposes, energy purposes.”

Adelson spent at least USD 98 million on the American election in 2012. He was a remarkable supporter of Bush and Gingrich.

I also want to focus next on a major deception in current history: the case of the American approach toward the Palestine and Palestinians.

Unfortunately, Iran’s nuclear program has been occupying the entire global political sphere for a while now, and consequently the issue of Palestine has been pushed aside, so Israel continues to promote its policy of building new Jewish settlements in Jerusalem and in the West Bank.

Gingrich, who was supported by the neoconservatives, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and many other pro-Israel lobby groups in America, very frankly rejected the rights of Palestinians as a nation:

“Remember, there was no Palestine as a state. It was part of the Ottoman Empire,” the former House speaker told the Jewish Channel. “And I think that we’ve invented the Palestinian people, who are in fact Arabs and are historically part of the Arab community, and they had the chance to go many places,” Gingrich said in December 2011.

It is a great deceit to deny an entire nation’s right to exist. Let me narrate a strange story of American deceit. When Henry Kissinger met Sadat and introduced his six-point plan as a ‘Kissinger plan,’ Sadat told him: “Never forget, Dr. Kissinger, I am making this agreement with the United States, not with Israel.”

However, the six-point plan was an Israeli plan, which is why Kissinger wrote in his book, *Years of Upheaval*, that “there was not a . . . smile on my face, but in my heart I laughed and laughed, because the manuscript of the plan was written by [Israeli prime minister] Menachim Begin.”

Now let me go back to Wendy Sherman’s statement about DNA. It is not difficult to find other, similar examples, where America and Israel deceived Palestinians and other Muslim countries. Look at all of the negotiations between Israel and Palestine—look at the Annapolis Conference in May 2007. The conference was merely a big show. What was the result? And who is the great deceiver after all? It seems to me that Wendy Sherman needs to read Rashid Khalidi’s book, *Brokers of Deceit: How the US Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East*, to find the real face of the great deceiver.

Ataollah Mohajerani is an Iranian historian, politician, journalist and author. He was Mohammad Khatami's first minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance of Iran. He also served as speaker of the Cabinet. He later became the president of the Iranian International Centre for Dialogue among Civilizations.

[Article 4.](#)

The National Interest

How to Handle Russia

[Denis Corboy](#), [William Courtney](#), [Kenneth Yalowitz](#)

October 28, 2013 -- That Russia and the West are cooperating to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons has caused surprise. It should not. Despite the Kremlin's rejection of Western liberal values, some practical cooperation takes place. To make more headway, America, Europe and Russia must interact in new and more realistic ways.

The Russia ruled by President Vladimir Putin is carving out a distinct Eurasian, not European, identity. It is not the democratic Russia for which the West hoped after the Soviet collapse two decades ago. Putin’s Russia relies on centralized authority, nationalism, and energy exports. It draws strength from control of a vast landmass and transport linking China, the

Middle East, and Europe. Russia seeks a shift to a more multipolar world in which it will hold greater sway.

Russia sees itself as an independent great power, but its foreign policy is often contentious. Russia has invaded neighboring Georgia, and bullied Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova not to sign trade and association agreements with the European Union. Yet Putin lambasts Western intervention in other states. Support of Iran and Syria gives Russia a regional role, but for over two years it blocked United Nations sanctions against Syria. In August, U.S.-Russian relations hit bottom over human rights and political abuses in Russia and Moscow's giving asylum to Edward Snowden, who has leaked U.S. intelligence data. With reason, President Obama cancelled a planned Moscow summit.

Augmenting its Eurasian thrust, Russia has forged a multitude of pragmatic ties with the West. It is the European Union's third-largest trading partner and a major energy supplier. Three-quarters of all foreign investment in Russia comes from the EU. Russia and America control over 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, and conclude treaties to lessen threats. Joint exercises take place to combat terrorism, nuclear theft and airplane hijackings. Much of NATO's military withdrawal from Afghanistan traverses Russia.

The effort to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons is Russia's most important and constructive diplomatic initiative. Moscow will deserve substantial credit if Syria surrenders its chemical weapons by mid-2014 and abides by the international Chemical Weapons Convention, a diplomatic option that emerged after America threatened force against Syria. Elimination will be a challenge, and Russia may have to apply more pressure on the Assad regime to force compliance. The West should probe whether the new collaboration can be expanded into other areas. What is needed first is a frank, broad-based dialogue at the policy level between Russia, Europe, and America. The discourse should begin with Syria and Iran, and cover Afghanistan, the broader Middle East, Russia's Eurasian neighbors, and the North Pacific region. Dialogue will not be a cure-all, but it can help clear the air and avert some tensions on troubling issues.

Security and narcotics threats in Afghanistan and Central Asia as NATO forces leave Afghanistan are urgent issues. Preventing terrorist attacks at the 2014 Sochi Olympics is another.

This is not an argument to ignore the Kremlin's human-rights violations, most recently its reversion to the Soviet-era practice of forced psychiatric treatment of political opponents. Westerners are dismayed at the crackdown on foreign-funded independent groups seeking to advance human dignity in Russia, seen by Putin as outside interference in domestic affairs. Despite these pressures and an uncertain business climate, potential exists for cooperation in several areas. Examples are scientific research, technology commercialization, energy and consumer products, education, and medical care. Over the long term, such activity will help develop civil society in Russia.

Increased practical collaboration will not, however, weaken Western resolve on issues of principle. One is strong support for the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics and their right freely to choose alliances and partners.

Europe and America, working together, can engage Russia more effectively to address troubling issues, mobilize energies, and solve problems. A 1990s US-Russian commission headed by Vice President Al Gore and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin tried, but disagreements over Iran and other issues, along with meager economic links, sapped momentum. The current US-Russian Bilateral Presidential Commission has yielded uneven results. A trilateral approach, with Europe fully integrated, would bring greater resources and might achieve more meaningful results. Europe's substantial clout with Russia is reflected in twice-yearly EU-Russia summits and numerous bilateral meetings, such as Putin's last June in Germany with Chancellor Angela Merkel. Europe's keen interest in human and political rights in Russia would strengthen dialogue on these issues. It will not be easy to bolster relations with Russia, but combining American and European energies may add valuable heft at this time of political tension.

Denis Corboy served as European Commission ambassador to Armenia and Georgia. William Courtney was special assistant to the President for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, and U.S. ambassador to Kazakhstan and Georgia. Kenneth Yalowitz served as U.S. ambassador to Belarus and Georgia.

Why Palestinians Should Not Recognize Israel as Jewish State

Nabeel Kassis

October 25 -- Anyone who honestly seeks evidence that the Palestinian leadership is serious about its pursuit of a peace settlement with Israel is bound to find more than enough of that. In fact, there is so much evidence that it may cast the Palestinian position as one of weakness and desperate eagerness. That would be a misreading of a responsible and principled position based on what the Palestinian leadership thinks is in the best interest of the peoples of the region, the Palestinian people foremost. Further testing and continuously raising the bar, by insisting on unreasonable demands to check Palestinian intentions, is counterproductive and threatens what could be the last opportunity to achieve peace based on a two-state solution. Putting demands on the Palestinians that are tantamount to asking them to accept Zionist credos cannot be taken seriously. A case in point is the demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

Despite the fact that the Palestine Liberation Organization has recognized the state of Israel for more than 20 years — with no reciprocal recognition by Israel of the state of Palestine — Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) has now added the issue of recognition of Israel as a “[Jewish state](#)” as a precondition for any agreement. He is the first Israeli prime minister to make such a demand, and it has largely been recognized for what it is — an attempt to undermine the negotiations and ensure that no agreement is reached.

Not knowing what is happening in the [current negotiations](#), I will venture to explain why such a condition should have no place on the negotiating table. Simply stated, this demand is discriminatory in that it concedes to all Jews, exclusively, an innate right to be in Palestine, whereupon Palestinians who live in Palestine do so only by permission of “the Jewish state” and not as an innate right. In fact, by recognizing Israel as a Jewish state, Palestinians would be stating that their presence in Palestine has been

illegitimate all along. Of course, this is out of the question, and Palestinians cannot accept it.

Palestinians have a historic right to be in Palestine and to exercise their right to self-determination and establish a sovereign state of their own. Hence, recognizing Israel as a Jewish state challenges and puts in jeopardy the rights of all Palestinians who continue to live in their ancestral land as well as the rights of Palestinian refugees who were forcibly displaced and expelled from their homes in 1948 to make way for a state with a Jewish majority.

Because Palestinians cannot and will not undermine their own cause, they cannot and should not recognize Israel except as a state of its people, and its people are not all Jews. In fact, 25% of the current population of Israel is non-Jewish. This is another reason why the Palestinians cannot recognize Israel as a Jewish state, but also why whoever calls for such should be called to task.

Some may argue that UN General Assembly Resolution 181 of 1947, the Partition Plan, called for the establishment of a Jewish state and an Arab state. This, however, was a different sort of state than the one that Netanyahu wants recognized. Resolution 181 on partition with economic union sought to resolve communal strife. Thus, the United Nations decided to create two separate states for the Palestinians — one for Palestinian Jews (and not exclusively Jewish in terms of its inhabitants) and one for Arab Palestinians (which would have included a small Jewish community). What Netanyahu is insisting on today is very different, so it is disingenuous to use Resolution 181 as the basis for legitimizing this demand. Indeed, a state for Palestinian Jews is not the same as a state for the Jews of the world. This is not to deny Israel the right to receive Jews from the rest of the world within its recognized boundaries. Once Israel was recognized as a sovereign member of the United Nations, with the condition that it respect all UN resolutions, including Resolution 194 [on the issue of refugees and compensation], it got leave to manage its own affairs, including immigration, subject to the said condition.

Once the state of Palestine receives equal treatment from the international community, Israel and Palestine will both be bound by what governs relations between states, mutual recognition included. Instead of asking Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, it is Israel that should be

called upon to recognize the state of Palestine and to withdraw completely from all the territory that it occupied with the force of arms in 1967. This would be a more meaningful demand from those interested in the success of the present negotiations. Instead of testing Palestinian seriousness, all others concerned should now show similar seriousness about the pursuit of a peace settlement that is just, comprehensive and durable.

[Nabeel Kassis](#) is a former member of the Palestinian delegation to peace negotiations in Madrid and Washington.

[Article 6.](#)

The American Interest

A New Grand Strategy in the Middle East

Walter Russell

October 27 - The White House is crafting a new, more modest second term strategy for the Middle East. That's according to a New York Times story, based on authorized leaks, which outlines a core strategy involving limited US engagement focused around three goals: reaching a nuclear deal with Iran, making peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and mitigating the conflict in Syria. The NYT reports:

Not only does the new approach have little in common with the “freedom agenda” of George W. Bush, but it is also a scaling back of the more expansive American role that Mr. Obama himself articulated two years ago, before the Arab Spring mutated into sectarian violence, extremism and brutal repression. The blueprint drawn up on those summer weekends at the White House is a model of pragmatism — eschewing the use of force, except to respond to acts of aggression against the United States or its allies, disruption of oil supplies, terrorist networks or weapons of mass destruction. Tellingly, it does not designate the spread of democracy as a core interest. This is actually a strategy of breathtaking ambition. US administrations have tried for decades to reach an understanding with Iran, and from the time of the Balfour Declaration to the present day ending the Arab-Israeli conflict has been the impossible dream of diplomats all over the world. As for mitigating the horrors in Syria, the administration so far

has had absolutely no success at that—and if anything the consequence of its peculiar mix of saber rattling rhetoric and practical passivity has been to make a bad situation significantly worse. The new strategy abandons core goals of the first term—we aren't doing much about democracy now and that whole idea of bridging the gap between the US and the Muslim world seems to have been left on the cutting room floor. At least the way the Times tells it, there is nothing here about a plan to deal with the terror threat. Will there be more drone strikes in Yemen or fewer? What will we do to mend fences with the Saudis? There's also a tension between the top two objectives. The tougher the US is on Iran, the more leverage it has pushing Israel toward concessions on the Palestinians. The more risks the administration takes and concessions it makes to get a deal with Iran, the tighter the Israelis are tempted to circle the wagons. Pursuing both objectives simultaneously risks a car crash, but then the Middle East is littered with wrecked cars from this and past administrations. The most hopeful point is that from the President down there's an awareness that the Middle East, important as it is, cannot be the be all and end all of American foreign policy. Asia matters, and although the NYT doesn't seem to have raised these questions, the damage that uncontrolled NSA snooping (combined with inept data protection efforts) has done to our relationships in Europe also calls for some serious action. As the US thinks about Middle East policies that address our key interests in the region but don't get in the way of equally important global policies, we are going to have think in a much more focused way about what those key issues are and how to get the most done with the least effort and risk. But it isn't enough to just say we are tired of the Middle East and want to go home. Problems don't fade away just because you don't want to deal with them anymore.

Walter Russell Mead is the Henry A. Kissinger senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and one of the country's leading students of American foreign policy.

[Article 7.](#)

The Economist

Indian foreign affairs

Oct 26th 2013 -- THE more embattled a leader is at home, the brighter the lure of foreign horizons. Manmohan Singh's growing collection of air miles makes the point. His trip early this week to Russia, his ninth as India's prime minister, was followed on October 22nd by one to China. Just before, on October 10th, he addressed a gathering of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), in Brunei, and visited Indonesia to launch annual bilateral summitry.

Hyperactivity is not new. Roughly a tenth of his near-decade as prime minister has been spent abroad; he has flown more than 1m km (620,000 miles) in 72 official visits. But now, beleaguered at home by scandal, an economy growing by barely 4% and gloomy prospects for his ruling Congress party, the airport departure lounge is more tempting than ever. Diplomats may grumble that time wasted on formalities could be better used, for instance in researching and setting long-term policy. And nothing could boost India's clout abroad faster than sorting out economic problems at home. But at least Mr Singh—dismissed as too often silent and ineffective at home—shows interest and some leadership in foreign affairs. And abroad he is unconstrained by his party boss, Sonia Gandhi. Nobody talks of a “Singh doctrine”, and activity in the short term can look chaotic. The main news from Moscow on October 21st, for example, was of how an unworkable nuclear liability law had deterred even Russia, an old ally, from building more nuclear-power stations in India. In China the release of an official policy paper on Tibet, just as Mr Singh arrived, might have been seen as a snub.

Over time, however, Mr Singh's foreign policy has shown some coherence. In his first term a 2005 civil-nuclear deal with America underlined India's deepening links with Western democracies. On October 23rd came another measure of the country's growing confidence: official equanimity as Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, met Barack Obama in the White House. With less fanfare, but no less important, Mr Singh's second term has brought closer ties to Asian democracies.

They have in common Mr Singh's push for economic relations as a foundation for strategic ones. At the Brunei ASEAN summit, for example, he called for an existing free-trade deal between South-East Asia and India on goods to be extended to cover services and investment. He wants

bilateral trade to be worth \$100 billion by 2015, up from \$76 billion last year.

In turn India's Asian diplomacy is part of a bigger "look east" policy. With Indonesia, for example, India has a "strategic partnership" that includes discussions of maritime security. If it proves more than just talk, two large Asian democracies, both friendly with America and both wary of China, could have much to share.

And that is also true of Japan, where relations are especially warm, the more so since Shinzo Abe returned to power. Japan has promised \$4.5 billion for a freight and industrial corridor between Mumbai and Delhi. Last month it extended a currency-swap deal, from \$15 billion to \$50 billion, to support India's rupee. Next month Emperor Akihito makes a rare visit, and Mr Abe is expected in January. Japan is also hoping to sell coastguard seaplanes, perhaps a hint of future co-operation on defence. Behind all this is a shared preoccupation with China. Srinath Raghavan, of the Centre for Policy Research in Delhi, notes that ties with Japan, for instance, have become much closer in the past two years because of tensions between Japan and China in the East China Sea.

The dragon in the room

India's direct concern with China is its disputed 3,380km-long Himalayan border. This week brought apparent progress in managing that, though not settling it. In Beijing on October 23rd Mr Singh and China's prime minister, Li Keqiang (pictured), oversaw the signing of nine agreements on such issues as river-sharing and co-operation against terrorism.

Most notable among these was the Border Defence Co-operation Agreement, partly because it was signed by India's defence secretary and a leader of China's army, the PLA. In theory soldiers at unmarked parts of the border will get clearer rules to avoid or limit confrontation, such as during the three-week stand-off after China's incursion into Ladakh in April. The risk of clashes is growing as India catches up with China by building roads and other infrastructure on its side of the border.

Yet what is really needed is a firmer push to settle rival claims to the border territory, not just to manage clashes. This almost certainly means accepting existing areas of control: China keeps Aksai Chin in the west, India holds on to Arunachal Pradesh in the east. And Mr Singh said "negotiations towards a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable

settlement” to the border question will be “our strategic benchmark”. That would be welcome if true, but no one in Delhi believes there is any prospect of it soon.

Sing me one last song

One reason for hesitation is that Mr Singh is in no position to do such a deal. He is on the way out: recent trips amount, in effect, to a global farewell tour. India’s general election, in May, will almost certainly mark the 81-year-old’s retirement. During an election campaign, no politician would dare to make any foreign compromise, such as giving up a claim to territory.

Such concerns are most evident in matters relating to India’s near abroad. Mr Singh is hesitating over whether to attend a Commonwealth summit in Sri Lanka next month because of Tamil opposition in the south. Similarly, his government, despite promises to Bangladesh, will not present a bill to parliament on swapping a chunk of territory along a messy border with West Bengal for fear of a local backlash there.

Such caution reflects profound weakness domestically. Yet any successor government could face similar constraints. On October 18th Narendra Modi, India’s main opposition leader, from the Bharatiya Janata Party, gave his first speech on foreign policy. He sounded much tougher than Mr Singh, for example when warning that India is making a mockery of itself with “its limited and timid approach” to China. “We remained weak where we needed to be strong,” he said.

But even if Mr Modi were to win the election next year, he would probably rely on regional coalition allies to sustain him in office, such as those in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal who could undercut his ability to set long-term policy, at least in the near abroad. Bafflingly, he used his speech to promote the idea that Indian states should be given more power to shape foreign policy. If he ever gets into office, he may regret that line.